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“Goblin Market”:

Reclaiming the Female Tradition of Fairy Tales

Most people associate fairy tales with the movie versions by Walt Disney or with the stories written down by the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christen Anderson, or Charles Perrault. While male representations of these stories have dominated popular Western culture since the late 17th century, it’s important to remember that the fairy tale and folk legend tradition originated as women’s stories, as explained and examined by Jack Zipes, Marina Warner, and Maria Tatar, among other fairy tale scholars. These stories shifted from fanciful stories of enchantment to educational stories in the nineteenth century as the identification and role of children shifted from one of a miniature adult to a being separate from adults. Many women’s writers in the Romantic and Victorian eras were writing themselves into history and creating and/or expanding on an inherited female tradition, which is contrary to what many second wave feminists would argue one hundred years later. One such writer was Christina Rossetti who wrote one of the most well-remembered Victorian poems – “Goblin Market”. While it’s easy to dismiss “Goblin Market”as a mere fairy tale or fable, as many early critics did, the poem is much more than *just* a fairy tale. From my perspective, it seems that critics accept the fanciful aspect of the poem as a given, but very few have actually investigated the importance of Rossetti engaging with this tradition. I will argue that not only is “Goblin Market” a fairy tale, but also that by using this traditional form, Rossetti is reclaiming the fairy tale for women’s writers, creating an early feminist text.

It could be argued that the fairy tale, folklore, and fable traditions have existed as long as humans could speak and communicate, but it was only in the late seventeenth century that these stories were written down for a wider, primarily European audience. It’s important to remember that these tales began in an oral tradition by women who either worked the farm and needed to keep themselves occupied, or they were caregivers who were telling bedtime stories to children (Tatar; Zipes; Warner). Charles Perrault’s *Tales of Mother Goose* was the first widely known printed version of these stories that were taken from women’s folk tales and published by a man. These stories, which have become so ingrained in popular culture, especially Western popular culture, were meant primarily for entertainment, and only in the nineteenth century were they seen as tools for educating children. These stories continued to be written down by men later in the nineteenth century with the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christen Anderson. While there are other fairy tale traditions, this paper will focus only on these Western fairy tales as an inherited tradition that Rossetti appropriates for women’s writers.

While the authors I mentioned are male, fairy tales are a traditionally female genre of storytelling. Maria Tatar argues in the Introduction to the Norton Critical Edition of *The Classic Fairy Tales* that tales of enchantment have been related solely to the domestic and feminine form of storytelling from the beginnings of the genre in Ancient Greece with Plato referring to the “old wives’ tale” in the *Gorgias* as a negative term. Tatar mentions how Perrault meant his tales to be “old wives’ tales ‘told by governesses and grandmothers to little children’” (x). Tatar references Marina Warner’s historical analysis and tracing of the old wives’ tale as both a learning tool and a pejorative term. However, it seems that Rossetti is using this form as a way to re-invent or re-vision, as Adrienne Rich argues in 1975, the fairy tale away from the pejorative and into the accepted and literary. It could be argued that Rossetti is successful in appropriating the fairy tale because her work was widely accepted and appreciated by critics. While some would dismiss it as a mere fairy tale, contemporary critics of Rossetti, like the 1862 review in *The Anthenaeum*, called “Goblin Market”, “the most important of Rossetti’s poems [that] has true dramatic character, life, and picture for those who read it simply as a legend, while it has an inner meaning for all who can discern it. Like many of its companions, it is suggestive and symbolical without the stiffness of set allegory” (Rev. of *Goblin Market* 557).

As has been traced by Tatar, Warner, and Zipes, many of these tales were held in the domestic space because, as Perrault said, the stories were meant for women to tell to children and other women as learning tools. In Perrault’s tales, this is obvious through the “morals” at the end of each story. The Brothers Grimm take many of Perrault’s stories and make them more appropriate for children by taking out some of the overt and graphic violence. Similarly, Rossetti uses this long-standing tradition of a tale of fancy for “Goblin Market” and adapts the fairy tale in order to address nineteenth century, Victorian concerns about women and morality, among other issues that the poem addresses. As Julie Sanders says in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, “one of the reasons fair tale and folklore serve as cultural treasuries to which we endlessly return is that their stories and characters seem to transgress established social, cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries” (82-3). Sanders argues that the adaptation of the fairy tale allows an author to engage in a set tradition that has certain expectations and archetypes (82), which offers proof as to why Rossetti may have chosen the fairy tale for her most famous poem.